

OPEN AND SHUT?

Wednesday, July 17, 2013

Joseph Esposito on the state of Open Access: Where are we, what still needs to be done?

This is the fifth Q&A in a series exploring the current state of Open Access (OA). On this occasion the questions are answered by Joseph Esposito, President of Processed Media.



Joe Esposito

In the nine years since I started my blog I have interviewed a great many people about OA. Very few of my interviewees, however, have been publishers. This has not been entirely by design, more a function of the fact that publishers tend to be reluctant to speak to me. There are doubtless a number of reasons for this reticence, not least a preference for speaking to the mainstream media, which can provide a great many more eyeballs for their messages than I can.

It has been no surprise to me, therefore, that I have thus far been unable to post a response to my questions from a publisher. But I remain hopeful that success is just around the corner.

The good news is that in the meantime Joe Esposito has volunteered to answer my questions, and I think he has done so in a direct, honest and no-nonsense manner. Whether one agrees with his views or not, it is clear that Esposito is a very bright guy.

*Esposito is no longer a practising publisher, but works as a publishing consultant. I therefore believe it reasonable to conclude that Esposito's answers to the questions below provide us with a representative picture of how publishers view the state of Open Access today [Esposito, however, disagrees with this assertion: see below**]. And since Esposito is a *self-professed* "advocate of open access publishing", the topic of OA is clearly right up his street.*

What are the take-away points from his answers? For me, two things seem noteworthy. First, in their frequent complaints about "greedy publishers" OA advocates tend to assume that publishers inhabit the same moral universe as they do, one in which things like fairness are key principles. Esposito reminds us that publishers operate by a different set of rules – the rules of the market place.

This is apparent in his answers below. It was also apparent in a discussion Esposito took part in on the Liblicense mailing list earlier this year, where he pointed out that publishers would never pay authors royalties for their journal articles unless they could see an economic benefit for themselves from doing so. "What's important to bear in mind is that that is the appropriate measure, the profitability of the entity making the payments. Fairness has nothing to do with it unless perceived unfairness eats into profitability."

Esposito concluded with a quote from the 28th President of the United States Woodrow Wilson: "The truth is we are all caught in a great economic system which is heartless." (As a matter of interest, [here](#) is the context of Wilson's quote).

For me this raises an interesting point. Given what Esposito refers to below as the "moral urgency" of many OA advocates, should we conclude that at the heart of the scholarly communication system is an irresolvable conflict of interest between the aims and objectives of publishers and those of the research community? Or is it simply that, as Esposito suggests, the OA movement ought to consider "getting rid of the idealists"?

This leads me to my second point. Could it be that the OA movement has become so distracted by its constant discussion of things like fairness and greed – and how one even defines Open Access – that it has failed to notice the game is already up? While OA advocates continue to fill mailing lists and social media

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platforms with their disagreements over definitions and strategy, publishers are busy *launching OA journals*, and *lengthening their Green OA embargoes*; and doing so in ways that suit their needs, not the needs of the research community. If true, the good news is that the OA movement will get what it has been calling for; the bad news is that it may not like the form in which it gets it. But then, as Esposito puts it, “The marketplace has its own mind and makes its own decisions.”

It is perhaps for this reason that Esposito ends by pointing out that he found my questions unexpected. “I deal professionally with OA questions every day. The topics you raise are not the ones the people I speak to are thinking about. They are studying how to build direct-to-consumer services for their new customers, who happen to be authors; how to optimize search-engine discovery; how to automate more aspects of the service to drive costs down further (and then compete with lower prices); the role of social media; and so on.”

Be that as it may, I think my second point draws our attention once again to the gap between idealism and pragmatism. Idealists want to create a world that they would be comfortable living in, pragmatists like Esposito accept the world as it is, and then seek to prosper from it. And why wouldn't they? As Esposito likes to boast, he is currently making a lot of money advising publishers and learned societies about OA.

But do please read the Q&A below. Esposito makes a number of other noteworthy statements. He argues, for instance, that despite its merits, and apparent traction, OA will nevertheless remain a marginal activity. As he says, “I don't see OA becoming the primary form of scholarly publishing.”

Earlier contributors to this series include palaeontologist *Mike Taylor*, cognitive scientist *Stevan Harnad*, former librarian *Fred Friend* and SPARC director *Heather Joseph*.

The Q&A begins

Q: In a 2004 *article* published in First Monday you wrote, “While OA has a future (OA is the future), the debate over OA does not.” I think it fair to say that you then went on to characterise OA advocates as a somewhat naïve bunch, suffering from what you called a “Change One Thing worldview”. You also argued that OA “will come about not through a revolution in the world of legacy publishing, but through upstart media built with the innate characteristics of the Internet in mind”, which led you to suggest that *PLOS* and *BioMed Central* are not radical enough – having “ensnared a killer whale and brought it to the circus, where they expect it to behave like a trained seal.” In short, I guess you were suggesting that OA will be additive, not substitutive to traditional models. But does that article still accurately reflect your views on OA, and in what ways have your views changed? (For instance, you did not appear to anticipate that by now most, if not all, legacy journals would be offering OA in one form or another. Indeed, some might be tempted to conclude that OA is in the process of being appropriated by legacy publishers).

A: You packed quite a bit into that question, and I'm not sure if I can respond to it all. The basic outline of how OA has developed is pretty much in line with how I thought it would be (but the debate goes on: I was dead wrong about that). The legacy publishers have jumped in faster than I thought (I am biased toward start-ups). My view of OA then and now is that it is a useful, marginal activity that opens up a new class of customers through the author-pays model and that it would be subject to the laws of market economics like any other thing. And that's what has happened. It is additive, not substitutive. And it's a great development. It's just not a revolution.

OA is marginal in the sense that most research is performed at a small number of institutions. “Most” is not the same thing as “all.” Those institutions subscribe to most (not all) of the relevant materials. So by definition the access granted by OA is marginal to what researchers at the major institutions already have. Nothing wrong with working on the margins, but let's call it what it is.

The essay you cite in your question was the first one I wrote on OA. I developed my argument further a couple years later in *The Journal of Electronic Publishing*, available *here*.

Q: What for you have been the biggest surprises and disappointments in the development of OA since you wrote that article, and why?

A: As I said above, the legacy publishers jumped in faster than I would have expected. I am surprised that Creative Commons has gotten traction with the OA movement. CC is basically an administrative convenience, nothing more. It now seems to have picked up some of the energy of those who want to storm the barricades.

The biggest disappointment is with the rhetoric. It's so extreme.

Q: In 2004 you expressed some impatience with the various OA categories. However, I think it fair to say that people still attach a lot of importance to the distinction between *Green* and *Gold OA*, and there continues to be a great deal of discussion (and disagreement) about the roles they should play. From the perspective of publishers, what would you say should be the respective roles of *Green* and *Gold OA* today, and why?

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***Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...



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Robin Osborne
on the state of Open Access: Where are we, what still needs to be done?

One of a series exploring the current state of Open Access

A: My complaint about all the varieties of OA (Budapest, Bethesda, whatever) is that they are all top-down and before the fact. The marketplace has its own mind and makes its own decisions. The marketplace has found a use for the Gold model. The Green model has been less disruptive than I thought it would be.

For publishers the author-pays model can provide additive revenues either for entirely new journals or for a cascading system of journals. The Green model is essentially a matter of compliance with funding agencies. Nothing inherently wrong with either model. The art is in the implementation.

Q: What would you say should be the role of Hybrid OA?

A: I don't have any evangelical feelings about any aspect of publishing, not traditional publishing, not OA, not hybrid OA. If people find it useful (as evidenced by their willingness to pay for it), that's fine. If they don't find it useful, it goes away, at least in theory, though many services lacking in demand get supported indefinitely in some settings.

What is sometimes called "double-dipping" is known in other contexts as an aspect of two-sided markets. Rather than deplore the greed of people who find more than one market for a product or service, why not celebrate their ingenuity? Does anyone disparage a library because it decides it wants to set up its own publishing program? I just don't see where all this moral urgency comes from.

Q: How would you characterise the current state of OA, both in the US and around the world?

A: OA, as predicted, is being absorbed into mainstream publishing. It is doing this by identifying a new category of customers, authors, that provides a new source of revenue. OA largely exists outside the library setting, which is ironic, considering how many librarians are strong adherents of OA.

Every week brings news of another traditional publisher creating an OA service. The stunning success of PLOS ONE made them all sit up and pay attention. I literally just got off the phone with a society publisher who wanted to talk about an OA program. It just isn't news any more.

As for the international dimension, I can't speak with any authority. Most countries outside the US (except for less developed countries that create little IP of their own) tend to be more conservative about publishing issues. The exception is the UK, where all hell has broken loose. I don't know where that will end up. Scholarly publishing is a significant export for the UK and policy decisions may get made with that stubborn fact in mind.

Q: If OA is to become the primary form of publishing scholarly articles (as many expect it to do) what in your view still needs to be done, and by whom?

A: I don't see OA becoming the primary form of scholarly publishing. You know, when you look around at the Internet overall, you see that the proportion of subscription-based services is growing, so you would have to make a case for why scholarly material is somehow exempt from the forces that drive other networked communications.

For OA to become dominant, librarians around the world would have to go to their provosts and say they want to reduce their materials budgets by more than half. That's what it would take: self-immolation of the library community. Does anyone foresee that? My view is that librarians, like everyone else, act in their own interests, and today librarians are locked in an unholy embrace with the traditional publishers, from whom they purchase materials.

Q: What in your view is the single most important task that the OA movement should focus on today?

A: Getting rid of the idealists. Let pragmatism abound!

Q: What does OA have to offer the developing world?

A: This is the "why isn't Rwanda more like Marin County" argument. Not my topic, and I don't see why anyone gives it much priority. The developing world has more fundamental issues (stable government, access to clean drinking water, etc.) than trying to give a researcher in sub-Saharan Africa the library resources of the faculty at Stanford or MIT.

There is no point in opposing what are essentially good-hearted intentions — Why would anyone want to do that? — but it would be nice if people maintained some sense of proportion.

The mechanical response to your question is that developing economies generate little IP and thus would like to import as much as they can. OA makes that possible. But we should not be surprised if first they wanted to establish reliable electricity generation and an operating telecommunications system.

Q: What are your expectations for OA in 2013?

(OA), the Q&A below is with Robin Osborne , Professor of Ancient History a...



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founded a new company called Knowledge Unlatched (KU). The goal, she explained in 2013, was ...

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A: 2013 is almost over. There will be more OA announcements. We will probably get some movement in the US on the [OSTP's plans](#), which will implement what is essentially a Green program.

There will be a new CEO at PLOS.

We might begin to see some downward pricing pressure on the Gold OA services now that the competition is getting sharper.

Q: In your First Monday article you argued that an unanticipated outcome of the success of OA would be that “the overall cost of research publications will rise”. Since the [starting point](#) of OA advocacy organisations like SPARC was that the research community can no longer afford the traditional subscription system how will the research community be able to cope with the fact that OA will increase costs rather than reduce them?

A: I'm not sure that that perspective has the story right. Here is another narrative for OA. Research funding grows, but the money allotted to libraries to purchase materials does not keep pace. Researchers are then stuck in a difficult position: they can get funded for research, but have to struggle to publish to advance their careers. The author-pays model, invented by a commercial entrepreneur, opens a safety valve for those researchers.

Interestingly, many of the Gold OA fees are now being absorbed by the funding agencies. So in effect the funding agencies are making up for the shortfalls in library budgets.

I must say that I find your questions to be unexpected. I deal professionally with OA questions every day. The topics you raise are not the ones the people I speak to are thinking about. They are studying how to build direct-to-consumer services for their new customers, who happen to be authors; how to optimize search-engine discovery; how to automate more aspects of the service to drive costs down further (and then compete with lower prices); the role of social media; and so on. Is there an OA bubble?

Joseph J. Esposito is President of Processed Media, a management consultancy working primarily in the worlds of publishing, software, and education. Esposito's clients include both for-profits and not-for-profits. A good deal of his activity concerns research publishing, especially when the matter at issue has to do with the migration to digital services from a print background.

Prior to setting up his consulting business, Esposito served as CEO of three companies (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Tribal Voice, and SRI Consulting), all of which he led to successful exits. Typically he works on strategy issues, advising CEOs and Boards of Directors on direction; he has also managed a number of sticky turnarounds.

Among other things, Esposito has been the recipient of grants from the Mellon, MacArthur, and Hewlett Foundations, all concerning research into new aspects of publishing.

== POSTSCRIPT ==

**** Esposito emailed me the following response to my introduction.**

You correctly state that I am a publishing consultant, but I also work for libraries, software companies, and philanthropies. My clients are for-profits and not-for-profits alike. I cannot recall when I last worked with a for-profit publisher. I have never worked for any of the big commercial firms: Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, Sage, Taylor & Francis. But I would like to.

Related to this point I would add that the management of any of the firms listed above would choke to be told that I represent their point of view. I have opposed one policy decision of the big guys after another. The fact that I think that some OA advocates are naive does not mean that I am in the same camp as the big commercial publishers. I am non-ideological by nature.

Which gets us to pragmatism. You contrast the idealists with the pragmatists, who simply want to profit from the marketplace. Not so. I am very concerned with science and scholarship and believe that I have made my small contribution to their enhancement. I am in this for the money, but I am not in this only for the money.

Where we will always disagree is in what I would call your unchallenged assumption that OA is good for science. I doubt it is either good or bad. Having recently visited my physician, who reaches instantly for technology that makes me healthier, allows me to live longer and happily, I ask myself: How could all this be if Elsevier were truly stopping the advance of science? Commercial publishing demonstrably

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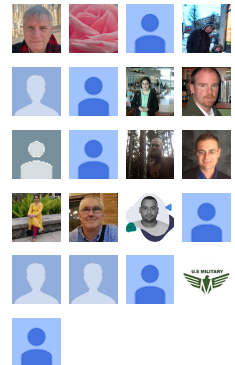
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has been good for science; our augmented life expectancies are the evidence.

So please find room for the pluralist. I solve problems. The key to solving problems is articulating what they are. This is the real failing of the OA movement: it is a movement, not a strategic plan. Emotion clouds judgment.

Posted by Richard Poynder at [15:30](#)



1 comment:

Fred Friend said...

A very interesting interview. I agree with Joe that market-forces will out, but the large number of researchers across the world who are adopting OA are a powerful force in the market. Likewise the research funding agencies are flexing their market muscle in favour of OA. As a former librarian I disagree with Joe about the effect of librarians acting in their self-interest. Self-interest and idealism both make a librarian look at value from the library grant rather than the size of the grant. Spending the library grant upon an OA repository provides greater value to users than spending money on big deal licenses.

July 18, 2013 11:16 am

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